

F/LT Vern L Scantleton DFC War Experience 5

In a previous issue, I mentioned that if I could get some more information on "FIDO" I would write another war experience story.

I wrote to Squadron Leader Jeff Bray in England, but he was unable to give me the details I required about the use of "FIDO" in World War 11.

The code name "FIDO" stands for "Fog Intense Dispersal Of" or in simple terms the dispersal of intense fog.

Very few people are aware of "FIDO" in World War 2 and in fact some five years ago I read in a squadron newsletter that someone in England was researching wartime "FIDO" and was asking that anyone with information should write to a given address. I now greatly regret not having made contact with this person, as no doubt he would have appreciated my small contribution and in turn I would have benefited. My regret is that I have no record of the date I used "FIDO", the aerodrome which had "FIDO" installed, and the drome to which we were diverted on return from the operation.

This I feel reduces the authenticity of the story but on the other hand is worth telling if only to help keep "FIDO" alive!!!

I believe that I am probably one of only a handful of Bomber Command pilots who would have taken a four engined aircraft off on "FIDO" - "in anger against the enemy".

To appreciate the reasoning behind the operation to be carried out, it is essential to have some knowledge of the weather conditions etc. which prevailed over the U.K. and Europe in those years. In England factories operated at full capacity, 24 hours a day, and belched out an enormous amount of smoke, and with no emission control added to this, normal household heating were coal fires, which again by the tens of thousands poured black smoke into the atmosphere. All this combined to give an incredible industrial haze, particularly in the Midlands. Quite often on relatively mild days the Met. Report which all pilots had to receive before take off would often read "Horizontal Visibility 3/4 Mile".

This was not as bad as it read, as once airborne and gaining height, the horizontal visibility improved considerably.

At various times during the year the U.K., North Sea and Europe was blanketed in very heavy fog for periods of up to 10 days. This prevented flying by both sides for some considerable time on a number of occasions.

The industrial haze over the U.K. combined with very intense fogs often gave a visibility of only about 25 yards (SMOG).

Towards the latter part of the war, these heavy fog/smog conditions were more

beneficial to the enemy than the allies. The allies could not use their bomber forces to continue the bombing of strategic targets, and the enemy benefited by the fact that factories could produce, without the time consuming delays caused by bombing alerts and search lights. Anti-aircraft crews and other personnel could be stood down for rests, and most important of all, maintenance could be carried out uninterrupted on overworked and damaged aircraft.

It was a fog situation, such as this that someone got the bright idea, that if possible, and at the earliest opportunity, a "SPOOF" raid should be carried out with the intention of throwing havoc into the enemy organisation, which because of the known fog pattern would be very relaxed.

A "SPOOF" raid is one in which, about six aircraft, flying together, and on planned routes could simulate a bomber force of some 3 to 4 hundred bombers, simply by throwing out "WINDOW" at regular intervals. "WINDOW" was a metallic strip, which the German radar could not differentiate between it and an actual aircraft. In this particular case the enemy would not be able to get aircraft into the air to confirm whether it was an actual bombing force or not. The route was planned to create the impression that the "force" could possibly attack a number of different areas and thus maximise the loss of factory production time etc.

It was during a period of intense fog conditions, that had prevented all flying for about a week that one morning six experienced pilots and their crew were instructed to get ready to fly to a particular aerodrome, if the fog lifted sufficiently, about midday, for the flight to be carried out. Conditions improved, and we were able to make a quick flight to the nominated drome, which we were to learn had a system installed called "FIDO", which allowed aircraft to take off under intense fog conditions. At this point of time, I had probably heard of "FIDO", but certainly knew nothing of its use or capabilities.

"FIDO" was a very simple installation, in which two pipe lines were laid down parallel, on each side of the runway. At specific distances jet nozzles were inserted into the pipe line. Fuel was pumped into the pipe lines, and the jets ignited. The heat generated by the fierce fires warmed the air along the runway, and thus lifted the fog. Looking down the runway you saw virtually a tunnel of very bright lights which in turn was blanketed by a thick fog.

That afternoon we were instructed to report to the briefing room, for an operational briefing, of which at that stage we were wondering "what the hell was going on".

The intelligence officer gave us a run down on the planned route, and the objective of the exercise. Little or no instructions were given to the pilots as to what to expect on take off for the first time on "FIDO" - perhaps it was a case that no one on the station had the experience of taking off a four engined aircraft and therefore no advice could be given.

The main emphasis during the briefing was by the "Met." Officer, who soon had us all sitting up and taking notice. He explained that although the U.K. and Europe were virtually in thick fog, an area in the extreme south of England was expected to be relatively fog free until about 11 pm that night.

The "Met" people forecast that an aerodrome in that area, which was capable of taking four engined aircraft, would remain open till about 11 pm when fog and low stratus would roll in from the north and obliterate it. The whole operation therefore depended very much on the accuracy of the "Met." forecast. We were finally told, that as this would be the only aerodrome open on return, and if by chance it became fog bound, then our only option was to fly inland, and set the aircraft on a westerly course with the automatic pilot on ("GEORGE"). The entire crew would then have to bale out, and the aircraft of course would eventually run out of fuel and crash into the Atlantic Ocean. As "Met." forecasts had proved wrong on previous occasions, I doubt if we were terribly impressed, but I am quite sure we accepted the situation as just another "op".

On turning the aircraft on to the runway that evening for take off, a certain amount of apprehension must have been on the pilot's mind, as he was well aware that a serious malfunction, or loss of a motor immediately after take off, with a full fuel load, would place the aircraft in a difficult situation, as it would be impossible to return to the fog bound drome. The pilot was also aware that on "FIDO" he was doing a visual take off under bright conditions. Immediately on leaving the illuminated runway, he would fly into cold dense air and total blackout conditions, in which his eyes would have to adjust to instrument flying instantly. At this point the aircraft would probably be only a hundred feet or so above terra firma.

I had no problem with the take off, but did get rather a shock. The heated air along the runway was less dense than the cold dense air of the surrounding fog. When the aircraft flew into the cold dense air it gave a severe "buck", which caught me completely unawares until I realised what had caused it.

The flight over enemy territory was uneventful. We had no fear of night fighters, as these were fog bound. There was very little "flak", no doubt due to the fact that many anti-aircraft crews had probably been stood down. Our niggling problem was what would the weather conditions be back at the aerodrome were we to land at on return? About twenty miles from the drome R/T silence was broken, with a request for landing instructions. I was surprised to learn that some of the other aircraft were ahead of us - I suspect they were doing a Stirling Moss on the return leg.

On entering the circuit on the down wind leg I could clearly see the fog and the low stratus, on the starboard side rolling in from the north and would be obliterating the runway in a short period of time. As time was now the major factor in getting down, I decided to disregard landing instructions, and by selecting under-carriage down, and some degrees of flap, it was possible to manoeuvre the aircraft into a position on the approach path.

At about 400/500 feet in the approach funnel, I could see by their navigation lights two aircraft ahead - one had landed and was halfway along the runway, the other was about to land. At this point flying regulations required that the landing should be aborted, and another circuit be carried out. I decided that time was not on our side, and that provided the aircraft ahead did not brake unnecessarily, and kept rolling and cleared the runway smartly, there was little to worry about - in fact I was more concerned that another aircraft may have been on our tail and too close for comfort.

Happily all six aircraft got down safely, and shortly after the runway was fog bound. I've never heard anything about breaking flying regulation. Bomber Command would have well and truly alerted the Station Commander and flying control people, of their responsibility in getting the aircraft down safely - and no doubt they would have been well satisfied just to see the aircraft on the "deck" - irrespective of how.

At the time we would have treated this as just another "op", but on reflection in recent years I now realise that the "powers that be", were prepared to take risks with the lives of aircrew and loss of aircraft, to carry out a particular operation.

One day on the squadron I received an official invitation to attend an investiture at Buckingham Palace. Included in the letter were two tickets that entitled me to take along two people as my guests. Without any hesitation I asked Gordon and Margo Henton to be my guests. Gordon and Margo were well known to my family. The Hentons had come out to Australia in the early 1930's, to run a large citrus orchard that they had purchased on the Lake Kangaroo Estates. (This estate had originally been started by John G. Gorton's father). The venture was not financially successful, and they returned to England prior to the war years. I spent a number of very happy and relaxed leaves at their home in Lincoln. I well recall that on one leave, I had my first and only meal of Jugged Hare. I was somewhat concerned as the poor unfortunate animal was left hanging on the back verandah for some days, until it had turned a greenish colour, and a most unsavoury look. At this point it was cooked, and to the best of my recollection I enjoyed it. I am pretty sure that type of preparation would not be suitable for Australian conditions.

On entering the stateroom where the investiture was to be held, I was greatly impressed by the size of the room, the high ceilings, and the lush carpets. A full guards band was playing soft music up one end, and did not appear to be out of place, and dominating space. In one corner a large and beautiful "L" shaped stairway led to an upper floor. During the ceremony my eyes caught a movement halfway up the stairs, and on closer examination, I realised it was the two young princesses.

Princess Elizabeth was peeping over the bannister railings and Princess Margaret had taken up a comfortable seat on one of the steps, and was looking through the vertical rails, with an excellent view of the proceedings. They looked two

natural impish girls, who may have been well aware that they were "out of bounds" to such a function.

The first person to receive an award was the young Canadian Army Major, who had won the Victoria Cross, in leading his men on the ill-fated commando raid on Dieppe in about 1942 (I think).

His citation was remarkable, in that he had led his men against tremendous odds, with great courage and determination. He was wounded in the attack, and finally had both legs blown off. As can be expected he received the V.C. sitting in a wheelchair. There is no doubt that all who were present, as the citation was read out, were greatly humbled.

In my case I did the customary bow, and moved up to the regulation one step from His Majesty. I was quite surprised on looking into his face to see how tired and ill King George VI looked. It was quite apparent that an amateurish attempt had been made to apply make-up, with the intention, no doubt, of trying to conceal from the general public, just how ill he was at that particular time.

On 4/6/45 I was repatriated from R.A.F. Station Oulton to Australia. After a brief stay at the R.A.A.F. Reception Centre at Bournemouth I left for Australia on the pre-war 30,000 ton American liner "Andes" together with a large number of other R.A.A.F. aircrew. The ship headed non-stop to Panama, and we all enjoyed the experience of passing through the canal from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean. A fast voyage took us to Wellington (N.Z.) where the Wellington R.S.L. entertained us royally during a few hours brief stay in port. Early one morning we entered the Heads at Sydney and sailed up the magnificent harbour to anchorage. All southern R.A.A.F. personnel were entrained for an overnight journey to Melbourne. At about 10 am next morning the train made a brief stop at Benalla, and I was delighted to have been met by some of the Roberts family, which included Trixie (Sue) who was to become my wife some three years later.

In many respects the stop at Benalla completed the full cycle of my flying career, as it was at Benalla No 11 E.F.T.S. that I did my elementary flying, and experienced the joy and exhilaration of my first solo flight, in a Wackett aircraft.

Dame Nellie Melba is said to have "retired" a number of times from her concert singing career - some will say Vern Scantleton was somewhat like that with his war time stories. Fear not the pen is dry, and the brain increasingly addled - so this is definitely my Swan Song.

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